

# Teams Group Chat Deletion Protocol

Category: Administrative  
Approval: Office of the Vice-President and Provost  
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## Glossary of Related Terms

The following are definitions for key terms related to this protocol:

| Term                 | Definition   |
|----------------------|--|
| Group Chat           | These are chat messages that result from 1:1 or many-to-many conversations held via the Chat mechanism in the Microsoft Teams application. Group Chats are distinguished from Channel Messages in that Teams Chats occur outside of specific Teams but exist in the Chat function of Microsoft Teams, the application. <sup>1</sup> The Chats are initiated between persons “instantly” as needed. The data associated with these chats are stored in a chat service running in Azure. The data are also stored in a hidden folder in the user mailboxes of the individuals participating. There is no user-available function to delete entire chats, and the chat content is replicated into the accounts of each person involved. |
| Channel Conversation | These chats exist within the confines of a Team channel and are stored in Azure chat service, while a copy is also stored in a hidden folder in a group mailbox.   |
| Meeting Chat         | If the meeting is scheduled in a team channel, then the meeting chat is treated as channel conversation. If the meeting is not associated with a team channel, then it is treated as a group chat.   |
| Retention            | Retention is the process by which chat transactional records are preserved. By default, messages that are created in a Teams Chat are retained   |

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify, the application to which this policy applies is called Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams has multiple functions including the hosting of topic/issue-specific groups, where people are invited to participate in an “enclosed” workspace called a Team. Each of these Teams has a defined membership and purpose. The files associated with a Team are stored within the Team space and are limited in access to those in the Team. Teams carry many functions such as shared file storage, audio-video calling, meeting calendar, Channels – containers to organise topical elements of a Team’s workspace, and pertinent to this policy, Chats (instant messaging). For the purposes of this policy, the chats contained within the confines of a Team will be referred to as Team Channel Chats.

Team Channel Chats are different from Group Chats in Teams. Chats in Teams are a function of the Teams application that permits individuals to have person-to-person, or persons-to-persons chats as needed. These chats exist outside the confines and controls of a Team Channel Chat.

| Term                 | Definition   |
|----------------------|--|
|                      | indefinitely. This protocol changes the default from indefinite to time-limited.   |
| Deletion             | The process by which chat conversations are deleted. Users are not able to delete chat threads, only individual messages.  |
| Rule Application     | Referring to the application of varying deletion rules to individuals, groups of individuals, specific Teams, e.g., project or course-related teams, teams for student groups... where the intended lifespan of the content may differ. <sup>2</sup><br><b>In relation to Group Chats, a rule applied to an individual or group of people will be applied across ALL of their Group Chats.</b> |
| Affected Individuals | When Group Chat rules are associated with distinct individuals or groups, the effects of applying those policies may extend to individuals with whom these people “chat”. Teams users must be advised as to the effects of applying rules.   |
| Ephemeral            | Content that is considered to have a very short lifespan.  |
| Team Lifespan Rules  | As Teams themselves may have defined lifespans, the Chat content associated with a Team will be deleted along with Team when it expires.   |

## Preamble

- The Microsoft Teams application provides multiple vehicles for communicating and collaborating, including a chat or text conversational function.
- Chats in Teams may occur within a Team, as a Channel Chat, or outside of a Team in the Chat function.
- Chats within Team channels may be managed within the Team controls. All conversational content remains singularly within the Team itself. The chats are also subject to the Team’s lifecycle and will be deleted when the Team ceases to be or at the discretion of the Owner (or Members, depending on the Team permissions settings).
- Standalone Group Chats are not associated with a Team and are therefore not subject to the controls that exist within a Team.
- By default, all Chats in Microsoft Teams have a perpetual duration. For records management purposes, the application of records management principles is recommended for Teams, and more specifically, for Teams Group Chats.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> An individual may have only ONE retention rule applied to their account and the effects will apply to all their Group Chats. Their individual retention rule does not override the chat retention WITHIN a Team though, where the Team retention rule prevails.

<sup>3</sup> By default, Teams chat, channel, and files data are retained indefinitely, unless there is an attempt to delete the content via retention policies, user deletes, admin deletes etc. As an admin, you can set up

## Protocol<sup>4</sup>

1. Group Chats will have a default deletion period of 90 days.
2. An alternative “fast delete” period will be available to individuals who request a change to the default for their account.
  - a. The chosen deletion period applies across all the Group Chats of the individual but do not apply to their participation in chats that exist within Team Channels.

3. **Deletion options for Group Chats:**

| Deletion Periods | Description  |
|------------------|--|
| 7 Days           | Fast – For people who request rapid deletion of chats.   |
| 90 Days          | Default – Enough time to look back but establishes a normal deletion protocol. (Timeframe TBD. 90 days for illustrative purposes.) |

4. A Group Chat is a convenient place to have a short conversation. ***By design, being outside of an established Team/Team Channel, these conversations are intended to be ephemeral in nature and are not to be preserved.*** If outcomes of a Group Chat are to be recorded, e.g., the assignment of action items, the completion of a policy or study... then these outcomes should be appropriately preserved in more stable form factors such a document, Web page, or a follow-up e-mail message<sup>5</sup>.
5. Application of a change to deletion periods for individuals must be requested through the Enterprise Service Centre and approved by a department head.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

1. Group Chats are generally created as spur of the moment, ephemeral interactions rather than being part of the intended records associated with a project, course, committee, or working group, hence they lie outside of specific Teams.
2. Group Chats should be regularly deleted based on a default deletion cycle in order to manage the volume of dis-associated<sup>7</sup> chats.

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*Teams retention policies (protocols) for chat and channel messages and decide proactively whether to retain the data, delete it, or retain it for a specific period of time and then delete it. (Microsoft Technet. <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/MicrosoftTeams/retention-policies> )*

<sup>5</sup> Noting too that a document or e-mail message may also be subject to a retention rule.

<sup>6</sup> The application of a deletion rule to an individual or targeted group will cause the protocol to be applied to all their Team Chat activity.

<sup>7</sup> “Dis-associated” because these chats do not live inside a Team.

3. Teams users require reference materials advising as to the appropriate use of the varied communication vehicles within Teams and the retention/deletion options. Important to note with this chat type is the lack of user-accessible controls for deleting conversations.
4. Where retention/deletion policy automation is not desired, alternative vehicles for storing these work products are to be used, such as e-mail or shared documents.
5. It is critically important to recognise the scope of a deletion policy. Those with whom they interact in Group Chats will have the messages in those conversations deleted according to the aging-period defined by the individual. There will be unexpected collateral message deletion that must be addressed via education and messaging.

## Scope of this Protocol:

This protocol applies to all University of Toronto faculty, staff, and students, who are able to access and use Microsoft Teams.

## Sample Retention<sup>8</sup> Policy Guidance (Example from U Kansas<sup>9</sup>)

Sample: Microsoft Teams Message Retention Schedule

| Function                    | Timeframe | Description  |
|-----------------------------|-----------|--|
| Person to person chat       | 30 Days   | Chats between two or more parties. Chats over the retention time will be silently dropped.             |
| Teams Channel Messages      | 365 Days* | Channel messages inside of Team sites. Conversations over the retention time will be silently dropped. |
| Recover Team Sites Timeouts | 30 Days   | The time from when a Team's site is deleted and when it can be safely recovered.                       |
| Video Calls                 | Not Saved | Recordings from video calls are not saved unless configured on a per call basis.                       |
| Voice Calls                 | Not Saved | Recordings from voice calls are not saved unless configured on a per call basis.                       |

<sup>8</sup> There is some terminology clarity required. Retention rules are intended to ensure records are retained for a specified amount of time. Deletion rules are intended to delete records after a specified period of time.

<sup>9</sup> <http://blogs.k-state.edu/it-news/2020/08/07/retention-schedule-for-microsoft-teams/>